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ABSTRACT

At the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), an urban university, students drop out of college on a regular basis. Developing a community of linked courses appears to be an effective way of reaching the university's goal of helping students stay in school past the critical first semester when many of them tend to leave. Seeking to help students during that critical first year, UALR supported an experimental effort to link three basic courses: anthropology, rhetoric and writing, and speech communication. To make the learning community effective, assessment efforts were undertaken by the faculty 3 months before the project began. Goals and cognitive learning objectives were developed to determine success--success would be measured on the knowledge level, comprehension level, and evaluation level. Ultimately, 25 students enrolled in learning the community. Assessment procedures consisted of pre- and post-attitude surveys, pre- and post-focus groups, course portfolios, reflective journals, and a pre- and post-analysis of a "Doonesbury" cartoon. Results indicated that learning community students performed better and achieved higher grades in their speech communication course and also performed well in their writing and anthropology courses. On the attitude survey, 88% of learning community students agreed that it is important to recognize the connections among other course content, and 84% maintained that the learning community had helped them to see those connections. Findings suggest that students had gained from their interpersonal activities in all three courses. Assessments indicated a positive result for the university's first attempt at a learning community. (NKA)

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***Assessing the Learning Community
Good News for Speech Communication***

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***Assessing the Learning Community:
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The Learning Community

Learning Communities (Tinto, Goodsell-Love & Russo, 1993) are formed when two or more courses are linked together. The same students enroll in all the courses and courses are usually offered back to back, however scheduling can take place in any configuration. Such linkages encourage the development of study and social groups among students which can result in common interpersonal bonds, important because students who forge personal, academic, or social connections with the university tend to stay in school (Tinto, 1993). Besides continuing with their education, the more students are involved in college, the more they gain from the college experience and the more likely they are to achieve a degree (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987; and Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Retaining students has become an issue on many campuses. At the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), an urban university, students drop out of college on a regular basis. Because the campus is largely nonresidential, students commute to campus, take their classes, then leave for jobs and other activities. The campus does not have a tradition of student involvement outside of classes, although there are many student organizations and activities available. This university profile fits well into the pattern established by research on retention (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987; and Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991)) which suggests that students do not continue in school because urban campuses, and others, fail to provide a personal connection for students to the

university, to the faculty and even to other students. Developing a Learning Community of linked courses, then, appears to be an effective way of reaching the university's goal of helping students stay in school past the critical first semester when many of them tend to leave the academic environment.

Many institutions, faced with the same exigencies as UALR, are experimenting with various kinds of linked cluster courses to foster a supportive climate in which students can develop ties to the university. Seeking a solution to the problem of helping students during that first critical first year, UALR supported an experimental effort to link three basic courses, anthropology, rhetoric and writing and speech communication.

One of the critical questions that arose as the faculty planned this first series of courses was how to determine whether or not the learning community was effective. At one level a quick glance at enrollment for the semester following the linked community effort would reveal if the students had continued in school, and this was certainly an important impetus to develop Learning Communities. However, the professors felt that deeper, more comprehensive assessment procedures would reveal problems, if any, with the structure of the courses, how well students learned each of the three disciplines in this format, and provide useful information about how to design subsequent linkages. Therefore, three months before the courses were to begin, faculty met to discuss assessment procedures. This paper will describe assessment efforts for the effectiveness of the Learning Community, provide findings from the survey, focus groups and qualitative comments from student attitude survey.

Assessment Planning

Specifically, the professors developed four goals for the Learning Community which are recorded in *Making Connections: Evaluation of the 1997 Learning Community Pilot*. 1) to enhance student learning by encouraging student-to-student and teacher-to-student involvement, 2) to provide entering freshmen with a support

network to ease their transition into college, 3) to improve the persistence of rising sophomores by promoting the student-to-university bond, and 4) to improve student understanding of anthropology, rhetoric and writing and speech communication by thematically connecting the content of the three disciplines.

Beyond these basic goals for the course, the faculty also developed cognitive and affective learning objectives that would both include and transcend any individual discipline. Dr. Franklin, from the Department of Educational Leadership, would perform the actual assessments and compile the final report of the Learning Community.

Cognitive Learning Objectives

The faculty selected three cognitive learning objectives as important to determine the success of this project. Dr. Kathy Franklin and the faculty, determined that success would be measured on the knowledge level, comprehension level, and evaluation level.

1. For the knowledge level it was determined that students should demonstrate knowledge as it relates to each of the three linked disciplines. This measure would be determined by each of the professors.
2. For the comprehension level students would understand "connections" inherent in the linked course experience by demonstrating a recognition of the connections among speech communication, rhetoric and writing and anthropology, active membership in the "community of scholars," and by recognizing their individual role in the learning partnership.
3. Finally, on the evaluation Level, it was agreed that students should use effective oral and written communication techniques to demonstrate anthropological thinking to evaluate personal and professional decision-making.

Class Demographics

Ultimately, twenty-five students enrolled in the community. One of the original

group of students retired for medical reasons leaving 24 students who participated in the first pilot learning community. 18 were female; 16 were white; 7 were black and one was an international student. The mean ACT score for the learning community was 23.39, comparing favorably with the university mean of 19.63 for first year students. The mean age for the learning community was 18.

Assessing the Community

Five different assessment procedures were developed to determine the effectiveness of the learning community, pre- and post- attitude surveys, pre- and post- focus groups, course portfolios, reflective journals, and a pre- and post- analysis of a Doonesbury cartoon:

1. Pre- and post-administered attitude survey

The survey assessed student attitudes before and after participating in the Learning Community on the importance of recognizing connections between disciplines, their personal involvement in learning, importance to developing student-to-student and student-to-university bonds. All twenty-four participantss received the forty-eight statement attitude survey in speech communication on the first day of classes. A five point likert scale accompanied each of the statements ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The post-survey was administered to students during the final week of classes for the fall semester. The format for the post-survey was replicated the pre-survey using a Likert-type scale for forty-nine statements. Where necessary, questions were rephrased to measure student attitudes after their participation in the Learning Community.

Additionally, the attitude survey was administered to students not in the Learning Community. Those individuals attending Introduction to

Anthropology who were not participating in the linked courses formed the basis of this group. Survey statements were reworded to reflect the non-community status of these students. This allowed researchers to measure the differences in attitudes between Learning Community students and those outside of the community.

2. Pre- and post- focus group sessions with volunteers from the learning community.

Nine students participated the pre- and post-session focus groups. Seven of the participants were female, seven of the participants were white, with two being African American. The focus groups were conducted in October and in December.

3. Course portfolio including student-selected examples of their best work in anthropology, rhetoric and writing, and speech communication.

Students were encouraged to select an artifact from their personal or professional life and an assignment from each class that represented their best learning and their experiences in the entire learning community. Students also wrote a brief reflective essay describing the assignments they included in their portfolio and were invited to comment on their experience as a participant in a Learning Community. Finally, each student was asked to submit a reflective journal in the final portfolio, encouraging them to think about their experiences and describe connections they saw between each of the courses.

5. Pre- and post- analytic essay of a Doonesbury cartoon.

In addition to these measurements, each professor volunteered to keep a reflective journal recording his or her perceptions, and estimations about

how well his or her objectives for the Learning Community were accomplished during the fall semester.

Results

Below are selected comments and quantitative reports about the effectiveness of the Learning Community in meeting the objectives of the course stated earlier. Many of these results appear in *Making Connections: Evaluation of the 1997 Learning Community Pilot, 1997*. This paper will focus on the first two, deemed to be most relevant to speech communication

Cognitive Objective: Knowledge Level.

Each of the professors determined if students had benefitted from the Learning Community. The excerpts from their journals listed below from the *Evaluation of the 1997 Learning Community Pilot*, testify to the success of this objective.

Professor for Speech Communication:

The results of the final assessment in speech communication were compared to the scores received by students in another class taught by the same instructor in the same way, with the same assignments, with students of similar demographic backgrounds. The following is an excerpt from the journal kept by the professor for the basic course in speech communication.

Students performed well on the departmentally standardized pre- and post-tests for speech communication. The students' level of communication apprehension diminished during the semester. Final grades for learning community students--almost ten percent higher-- indicate a higher level of understanding communication concepts than those of students in other classes. Thus, Learning Community students performed better and achieved higher grades in their speech communication course.

Professor for Rhetoric and Writing:

The unusually high results for a Comp I class suggest that my students acquired knowledge of writing. However, I would hasten to add that they wrote on

anthropological topics, showing that Comp I helped them to learn about "ethnocentrism" and other anthropological concepts. They also worked well in small groups analyzing essays and sharing rough drafts, suggesting they learned considerable communication theory.

Professor for Introduction to Anthropology:

On the final exam, I had the impression [that the learning community] students wrote essays in which they did a good job of providing supporting evidence of their points. This is only impressionistic, but it seemed as though they (1) improved over the term and (2) did better than most other freshmen.

Cognitive Objective: Comprehension Level.

a. Making connections between disciplines enhances the Oral Communication Across the Curriculum idea. Students can see how communication universally ties human efforts together and are forced to perceive, explore and apply communication to each discipline. In assessing the students' recognition of common themes among anthropology, rhetoric and writing, and speech communication, the attitude survey, focus group sessions, course portfolio and reflective journals provided useful information.

On the attitude survey, 88% of students in the learning community agreed that it is important to recognize the connections between other course content and 84% maintained that the learning community had helped them to see those connections. Only 72% of non-learning community students from Introduction to Anthropology felt the same way.

The initial focus group session showed that some students were frustrated that professors constantly discussed the connections between all three classes. Some students thought that professors believed they were "too stupid" to discover these connections on their own. By the last focus group session in December, many students agreed that the value of the learning

community was not necessarily in the linked course experience itself, but in the community environment established by linking the courses. This last development is exactly what the university hoped throughout the entire effort. Establishing community helps students form interpersonal relationships and thereby persist at the university. Below are several extracts taken from the *Evaluation of the 1997 Learning Community Pilot* that illustrate these themes:

"I really like the learning community, not because the classes were linked together, but because of being 'together' with the same people. In mean, I learned as much from everybody else as I did from the professors."

Other students expressed "their surprise in learning, through this experience, that all knowledge is related in some way (Franklin, 1997)."

One student capsulized this integrative experience:

The connections of these courses taught me not only the use of skills, but also how to use those skills to connect smaller things in my life to form a larger picture, a broader spectrum of what the world actually looks like. [The professors in speech communication and composition] taught me how to express my thoughts, while [the professor in anthropology] has taught me to take off my ethnocentric lenses to look at the world in a new light. The learning community has taught me to seek the connections between courses and the world around me."

Plus, students seemed to agree overall that the environment of the Learning Community enabled them to "understand difficult concepts and to improve their studying effectiveness (Franklin, 1997)."

"Just being able to realize how each of these could be connected helps to understand the principle being taught. It also makes study time more effective. To be thinking instead of just regurgitating is the best form of learning I have yet to encounter!"

Unfortunately, while the vast majority of comments were positive in this regard, a least one student did not see the academic connections the instructors hoped would emerge in the linked format. He (or she) expresses the thought in no uncertain terms:

"In my opinion the learning community was a major mistake. For starters, I will say the one and only positive in the whole experience was the friendships we made. But the rest of the junk involving the classes is, or was, a total waste of time. The classes chosen were not related in hardly any way. I am ready for classes that deal with one subject and one subject only. I don't want a Comp II class that is talking about Sociology. Yet in a perverse way, being a first semester freshman the learning community did help relieve the stress [in trying to make friends]."

The irony in this comment is that although this student saw little connection between each of the three courses, he or she developed that sense of community that propelled the entire project in the first place! Helping students to establish relationships and therefore connections to the university is an important piece of UALR's strategy to help students persist in their academic careers. To reiterate the theme of Learning Community research, through relationship-building, students tend to stay involved in their education, and thus, stay in school.

b. The next goal relates to the perceptions the students have of the value of becoming a part of the community of scholars. Analyzing this goal attests to the effectiveness of incorporating speech communication into linked communities and across the disciplines. Table 2 provides solid evidence that the students recognize the value of communication, particularly group work, as a worthwhile activity. Responses to statement 7, for example, "like working with other students rather than working alone," suggests that students in the learning community grew personally and intellectually from the group activities provided for them in all three classes. 78% percent of students in the Learning

Community agreed with the statement vs. 39% for those students not a part of the Learning Community. For statement 30, "this semester, participated in study group that help with understanding," indicates a similar reaction. 74% of the Learning Community students agreed with the statement, as opposed to 33% in the non-Learning Community. In every statement concerning group work, similar reactions are recorded.

The survey also suggested that students had gained from their interpersonal activities in all three courses. During this portion of the basic course in speech communication, students learn about passive, active and interactive strategies of meeting new people, presumptive and isomorphic attributions, and conversational competency. Statement 38 on the survey, for example, illustrates the effectiveness of this approach, "this semester, made good friends who supported each other," was answered with a resounding 95% for those in the Learning Community, as opposed to only 44% in the Non-Learning Community group. Other statements have similar responses and the focus data reiterates this theme:

"I feel like I'm accepted now. This is the first time I have felt this way."

"The learning community has been great in linking things together. It is a good idea to have these classes together as a group. I have made many friends in here; but in my other classes outside of the learning community, I do not have an opportunity to get to know my fellow classmates."

"I was not sure if staying with the same people all day long would be beneficial or not. By being on a brand new campus, I had hoped to meet a lot of new people. This idea was limited by being in this pod [of students]. However, by being a learning community member I was able to make close friends, some [of] whom I will stay in contact with throughout my college years. The learning community group had a unique bond that other students did not get to

experience. A bond was also developed between the teachers and the students. The student-teacher relationship also helped the learning community to be successful. . ."

These data suggest that students both enjoyed and saw value in performing group work and in establishing interpersonal relationships. Not only did students see value in these things, they actively participated in them, thus accounting for the high grades they received on group and interpersonal projects in Speech Communication, enhancing the effectiveness of the "Making New Friendships" portion of the course in speech communication.

Students succeeded in these areas by every objective and subjective measure. For example, group grades for the Design a New Product activity, where students are charged to use Dewey's Reflective Thinking to develop a new product that "will revolutionize the world as we know it," rose from an average of 78% for Non-Learning Community students in the second class mentioned earlier, to 92 % for those in the Learning Community. The Interpersonal Activity consisting of applying Berger's passive, active and interactivity strategies to developing friendships and then writing at length about the experience was superior also. In every case, students wrote more in terms of the number of lines for each of the questions associated with the activity. Many students filled entire pages noting their impressions of their target individual before they engaged in active or interactive strategies to get to know them. While writing volumes of material does not, in and of itself, constitute effective and meaningful participation in class activities, this student writing was thoughtful and, in some cases, profound. Additionally, test scores on interpersonal topics grew by 13.2%, by comparison to Non-learning community students in the additional class taught by the professor in speech communication.

Plus, the interpersonal connections students developed in all three courses generated a supportive climate, enabling them to perform well on tests and activities in both the small group and interpersonal contexts, and in their other classes. In addition, each of the three courses reinforced each other by requiring interaction and group work. Experiencing speech communication activities on multiple levels provided students with many opportunities to test concepts, apply ideas, and refine skills far more than they would have had they participated in the course in speech communication alone.

Discussion

By almost any measure, the Learning Community was successful. Students formed lasting relationships; they bridged the gap between high school and college; they learned difficult material in three separate classes; they spontaneously formed study groups; they performed better on tests and experiential activities than other classes in speech communication. These benefits were achieved because the supportive climate in the learning community enabled a strong, cohesive bond between students. Plus, because both skills and concepts were constantly addressed and applied to multiple contexts between speech communication, anthropology and rhetoric and writing, students learned the material thoroughly and relatively effortlessly. Course evaluations were uniformly good.

Some of these positive results may derive from the exceptionally high (for UALR) ACT scores students received upon entering the university, 23.39. Although efforts were made to base this pilot study on an average class, better than average students enrolled, which may account for some, but not all, of these positive results. However, the enthusiasm, commitment, and relationships formed in this class transcends scores.

Plus, the comparison between Learning Community students in speech communication with students in the other communication class was informal. Although

the text, instructor, activities and course content were virtually the same, comparisons between the two courses need to be formalized. Both courses, for example, should take the pre- and post- survey. Both courses also should participate in focus groups, and keep reflective journals for comparisons. Only in this way, can definite associations and projections be made.

In the short term, however, all assessments indicated a positive result for the university's first attempt at a learning community. Speech communication is a natural for this type of arrangement because communication can be applied to other disciplines, thus, enhancing its importance and desirability on campus. Other linkages are in the works and this, too, is positive because anytime the university can foster good relationships with students everyone succeeds and everyone wins, and speech communication can be a vital part of that growth.

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